

Werner Hofmann

A Bed Is Big Enough for Everyone¹

Special Invitation

Saturday, 3 July 1999, 12 o'clock, tea and cake

The Austrian Cultural Institute, 28 Rutland Gate, London SW7 1PQ

You are invited to meet Gelatin and to breakfast with them in a super jumbo-size double bed on the occasion of a very special symposium. Comfort and refreshments are provided for as well as simultaneous translations into twelve languages by interpreters positioned under the blankets. In case it should become too late for you to return home, you are cordially invited to spend the night here. A bed is big enough for everyone.

What immediately strikes one about this invitation is that it was sent by an institution whose job is to disseminate information that the Austrian state considers to be representatively 'Austrian'—whatever that means. Meanwhile, the announced event seeks to dispel the fears of those who see cultural institutes as organs for the dissemination of doctrinaire views. A gathering akin to the coffee-and-cake ritual is promised, a sort of Viennese snack. The message we are invited to glean from this gathering is that of a participatory concept of culture whose hedonistic slant holds out the prospect of a free choice of easygoing experiences. Relaxation is the order of the day; a feature of highbrow cultural consumption seems to have been suspended, the distinction, namely, between active exemplary figures and the passive recipients ranged around them. A divisive stage/audience experience gives way to a fluctuating crowd, where everyone is allowed to choose their part (or partner). The announced event consists simply in the fact that it takes place. Its message is coterminous with the dimension in which it occurs. There is no backdoor for hidden meanings. The tension between art and life, overcoming which is often the subject of the will to art in our age, has thus been transcended, the hermeneutic pretensions of art removed. That is an exception. As a rule, Gelatin are concerned with more.

At first sight, the offer that the special invitation makes is not new. Ever since the Cabaret Voltaire (its name a bow to the Enlightenment, whose ironic empowerment it announces) and those evenings in Spiegelgasse in Zurich, when backs were demonstratively turned on the bourgeois war adventure, repeated attempts have been made at overcoming the threshold experience of 'stage here'/'spectators there'. The Surrealists tried to appropriate the basic participatory idea; at the same time, they declared that acts of consciousness are never produced by individuals claiming the privilege of creative powers, but by unconsciously

acting collectives. But, in the long run, this banalization of the work of art failed to abolish the elitist concept of art based on subjectivity. The mere fact that a man like Breton took the director's stand and decided who was allowed to play shows that Surrealist practice conflicted with the thesis of collective action and mis-action. Furthermore, earlier gestures such as Duchamp's Mona Lisa with moustache demonstrated that mocking the masterpiece involves additional interpretations. Masculinizing his female model draws attention to Leonardo's homosexuality/bisexuality quicker and more effectively than psychoanalytical investigations.

The four individuals who refer to themselves simply as 'Austrian group Gelatin' stand in the tradition of the 'art of artlessness'² of the past century, yet their position within it is unique. They are not the successors of the Vienna Actionists of the 1960s. The Vienna Actionists practised a radical variety of Happening that only apparently conjured away the stage threshold. Otto Muehl and his collaborators wanted not to dissolve art in life, but to subject the audience to their sadomasochistic rituals. What they did to themselves was aimed, as a form of wounding in effigy, at the humbly spellbound spectators, who let themselves be mentally damaged and humiliated by the events.

Gelatin took on saliromania, which works with the transmutation of materials. Again, it is a question of (mystic) copulation with primal slime, with the *prima materia*, the return to the crowd, dissolution in promiscuity.

It would be wrong to see the revolt against the established cultural supremacy that gripped the entire Western world at the time as exclusively iconoclastic in nature. On the contrary, the revolt was iconoclastic only insofar as it rejected the picture as easel painting and tried to liberate it from its aesthetic inviolability as wall decoration. Muehl expressed this with great clarity: 'We recognize material as the real object of our painting.'³ Oswald Oberhuber likewise defended the unlimited possibilities of the plastic: 'Everyone who comes out of the womb has this need ...'⁴

Actionist expansionism glosses over doubt in the established procedures and avoids the border position Arnulf Rainer had already assumed in 1952. In a few lines his key text 'Malerei, um die Malerei zu verlassen'⁵ sketched the aporias with which painting in the Western world saw itself confronted in the wake of the insane Hitler era. Elsewhere, liberation was regarded as a sign to carry on, which generated superficial euphoria. In a Frankfurt gallery the twenty-three-year-old Rainer published the first of his many reckonings with his milieu, with academic teaching and art talk, opposing to all this his own ideas and wants. Ever since then, for six decades, he has trained his sights on borderline situations, operating in his over-paintings with paradox as the sole possible self-contradiction: the radical destruction of the pictorial tradition as an act that gives it new vitality. At the same time, his mortifications use his own subject as the object of the self-endangerment that keeps him alive. Rainer also helped exhibitionism (as an act of psychic wounding) to a new

intensity, putting it in the *ecce homo* tradition, which endows the artist with the double role of victim and saviour in one. What makes Rainer a leading figure is his aim to produce not just artefacts but interventions: heckling, refusal, damaged tablets of law, tattered veils, derisive self-doubt. All his manifestations impact his psychological existence and leave behind the signatures of wounds: pictures are the scars of wounds.

*

When one looks from Rainer to Kubin, to the young Kokoschka and Schiele, the wound is seen to be the index of the masochistic application of force that hands the I over to its counter-pictures, thus turning it into a work of art. That is a key feature of Austrian Modernism in which a 'double face'⁶—examining a person or thing in respect of inherent shortcomings and producing out of this a new, multi-pole system of reference—finds expression. This was one of the unsettling aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis. Ernst H. Gombrich, in whose thought the Vienna School attained world standard again, made the juxtaposition of two layers of experience clear for art history in the concept of 'disturbed form' he developed in his Vienna dissertation (1934).⁷ He was dealing here with a detail on the courtyard façade of the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, namely, the hanging triglyphs on the window frames. This 'defect' is an unsettling intervention that disconcerts the viewer, because it shifts the finished work into uncertainty, rendering its formal status unclear and handing perfection over to destruction. Thus destruction acquired a positive accent.

*

A fascinating early idea of the Gelatin collective envisaged 'the clandestine and casual intervention as art form', which itself originates in the concept of 'disturbed form'. Conceived in March 2000, this intervention was to be aimed at/against the 'perfect, smooth façade' of the twin WTC towers in Manhattan. Like the moustache questioning Mona Lisa's beauty, this intervention was designed to give this architectural hubris a wound: 'For exactly 20 minutes on a Sunday in June 2000 a balcony will be hung from the 91st floor of the WTC, on which someone will stand for 10 minutes as the sun rises. This illegal action is intended to remain undetected. The cameras are the sole spectators ...' The action was planned in a cardboard container into which no one could look. That, too, was an intervention directed against the open-plan structure of the offices. Since the windows could not be opened and there was only artificial illumination a potential 'deadly trap' existed. In 2001, Baudrillard referred to the building as a glass sarcophagus.⁸ The terrorists of 11 September took the metaphor to its logical conclusion.

Ever since then, basically, Gelatin have been speaking out against our civilization's sarcophagi cemented together by strategies of order. The right-angle provoked a counter-move. Thus Gelatin denounced Mondrian's 'closure' [*Geschlossenheit*] at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz and transformed Josef Hoffmann's Venice pavilion into a giant baking oven that transformed the twin processes of eating and digestion into a *regressus ad uterum*. The

bocca della verità on a church façade in Rome, which invites tourists to insert a hand, is also part of Gelatin's potential repertoire of metaphors. Or rather, hole-like openings are the central metaphor in the imagination of these four men, whereby the human body and its functions form an alliance with naturally occurring caves and cracks. The giant mud-tower is a cavity turned inside out, into which participants immerse themselves and from which they emerge again after undergoing the purificatory ritual of pollution. (The mud-hole in Diendorf am Kamp is the counterpart to this.) A huge plastic sack regulates the systole/diastole of *Suck and Blow*, the opening in which contracts like a 'monstrous sphincter'. These collective activities correspond exactly to the group's self-conception: 'Gelatin is a formless mass in perpetual movement that performs on sundry occasions with or without guests.'

The interventions often have the charm and poetry of private events. They neither insist on excluding the public nor suffer from the presence of media curiosity. But, at bottom, these four self-presenters are discreet, shy oddballs who are perhaps happiest when being loners—for instance as apostles of nature offering their erections to the mountain peaks (*Ständerfotos*). This humorous, meditative aspect calls to mind the idyllically absurd settings that Adalbert Stifter devised for the antiheroes of his novellas. The tale *Tourmaline* begins with the description of the apartment of a man whose hunger for pictures has created some curious inventions: 'All the walls of the large room were completely covered with pictures of famous men. Of the original walls themselves not a piece was still to be seen, not even of the size of a hand. In order that he—or, on occasion, a friend, when one came to visit him—might look at those men whose pictures were close to or directly at floor level, he had had leather-upholstered divans of various heights constructed, fitted with casters. ... For those pictures higher up on the wall he had rolling step-ladders ... from [whose] steps, different points of observation could be reached.' At the end of the room was a table 'at which he used to work with pasteboard, making shelves, boxes, screens and other handicraft articles.' Stifter is not only thinking of industry and skill as bourgeois pastimes; he also draws attention to the obsessions lurking beneath the leisurely veneer of Biedermeier.

Then there is the landscape painter in *Nachkommenschaften* who wants to build a house with a huge glass wall at the Gosausee facing the Dachstein. Then he will paint and paint until he succeeds in 'painting the Dachstein so that one can no longer distinguish the painted mountain from the real mountain'. The attempt fails. All in all, the tone of the story is one of resignation and the renunciation of ambitious plans. At the end, we witness a blithe auto-da-fé: 'In the house I removed the picture from its frame, dismantled the frame and packed it in a box. Then I cut the canvas from the stretcher, cut it into small pieces and burned them slowly in the stove. Then I broke the stretcher legs and burned them, too. Then I burned all my sketches, and finally my paints, brushes and palettes.' Form disturbed has given way to form destroyed. This Happening without an audience differs from the other descriptions of the destruction of pictures we have from the pens of Ludwig Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Balzac

in the blithe calm with which art is bid farewell.⁹ From art's embrace the painter flees into the arms of his beloved, Susanne. The conflict between art and life is seldom resolved so painlessly.

*

This divide was already one of the conflicts affecting the European public at the dawn of modernity when the world of manufactured things—banal everyday as well as absurd imaginary products—suddenly cropped up confusingly on the horizon of experience. It is to Bosch and Bruegel that we owe the first inventories of these tools and devices whose precise purpose is no more easy to determine than their—justified by the licence of the fantastic—absence of purpose.

The exhibition affords a glimpse into the picture industry of the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The world of biblical prophecies and threats rubs up against a hotchpotch of facts where the sediment of secular society, freed of ecclesiastical supervision, forces its path through the zones of desire, deceit, public and private satisfaction of lust, exemplary punishment and revolt against the forces of order. The stress is on a chaotic this-worldliness that drives people to blind activity from which there is no escape. The social antitheses are exclusively defined by the fight of all against all and the roleplay populating the different—paradisaal and hellish—flight spaces. Wilhelm Fraenger sought the key to this inverted world in the ideas and practices of the Adamite sect, which allowed complete liberty to the sensual pleasures.¹⁰ However, Bosch's paintings neither documented events nor illustrated orgies. His imagination nonetheless partook of the social climate of the age, a climate in which sensuality, in both its refined and coarse forms, played a central role. The fine chapter on the stylization of love in Johan Huizinga's classic work *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) is devoted to this 'climate'. Huizinga speaks of sensual mysticism and of a symbolism combining earnestness and cynicism. One recognizes in this mixture certain of the components that make up the mysterious behaviour of the figures in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Madrid). These figures are sophisticated yet evidently tired of sophistication, while remaining captive to it. Their sexual acrobatics—as later with the Marquis de Sade—turn in a circle like the ring of riders on the central panel, eternally repeating ceremonies.

This world theatre acquires a sociocritical slant with Bruegel in the following century. His inverted worlds are parables, yet they are clearly situated in the this-worldly roleplay which unfolds like episodes on an impromptu stage. In *Fight between Carnival and Lent* (Vienna) the antagonisms of the class struggle rising 'from below' are already apparent, embedded in an innocuous pattern of distraction that conceals the hopelessness of human action. The whole spectacle plays out between church and inn, and, to all appearances, it is the shabby site of worldly pleasure that will ultimately triumph over what the site of spiritual refuge has to offer.

Bosch and Bruegel avail themselves of ubiquitous roleplay to abolish the gap between actors and spectators. Moreover, they stage their pictures so that everyone, protagonists as well as extras, are participants in a collective pantomime, where each is potentially perpetrator and victim—knife and wound, as Baudelaire will metaphorically express it.

How did the first collectors of these pictures, the first buyers of these copperplate prints, react to their message? Did they feel warned and directed to the straight path of virtue? Putting it differently: Did they give preference to their inner affectedness, to their involvement in the play of vices and deadly sins, over ‘disinterested’ distance (Kant) that gradually characterized the public of museums and art exhibitions? This involvement concerns the issue of participation raised at the outset and the recovery of which, beginning with the Dadaists, is one of the major opening impulses of Modernism. Eliminating the boundary between actors and spectators, and thus depriving the latter of comfortable passivity, generates the life spark of participation that might prove capable of revolutionizing the centuries-old, ingrained aesthetic positions of giving and receiving. Here it would be necessary to redefine the competencies of artist and audience in line with Duchamp’s thesis that the spectator completes the work of art.¹¹ It is a question of implementing this charter in participatory play. From this should arise, little by little, semantic play. I realize that in doing so, however, we would go back behind one of the achievements of Modernism, the self-referentiality of the work of art, and call into question its institutionalization in museums and exhibitions. But ultimately that is not the point. It would be enough were one to succeed in disburdening the Kantian restriction to ‘disinterested pleasure’ of its monopoly claim. Instead, grasped in its effective potential, the work of art could help us discover life positions that contain more questions than answers. We would partake of the uncertainties in contemporary works of art. They are more numerous than the certainties.¹²

*

On his Italian journey in 1831/32, Hector Berlioz observed a peasant enter a church and kiss St. Peter’s great toe, whereat Berlioz, with the condescension of the educated, remarked: ‘Lucky creature! What do you lack? You believe, you have hope ...’ Thus intellectual superiority turns into envy. Schiller: The sentimental person envies the naïve person since he has what he is looking for¹³—‘... For me it means hatred and despair, since I lack everything I am looking for and have given up hope of finding it.’¹⁴

Hegel developed the crucial formulation here in his *Aesthetics*: Art has ceased to ‘be the highest need of the spirit’, it is no longer ‘the supreme way in which truth procures existence for itself’. The religious idea has been replaced by the sensory element. ‘Although we see God the Father, Christ and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer’.¹⁵ Hegel hints that he registers a loss. Art, while it passes over into higher forms of consciousness, has nevertheless ceased to ‘be the highest need of the spirit’.

The philosopher registers the division that has run through the cultural consciousness of Europe ever since the eighteenth century. Like Peter Burke,¹⁶ we see in this process the cleft between high and low traditions of culture, which erects barriers 'between educated people and popular traditions', between the Italian peasant with his belief in miracles and the Berlin philosopher fraught with his reflections on art.

Ever since the Dadaists proclaimed the anonymous object as the way out of artificializing the will to art almost a hundred years ago, ever since Duchamp invented the art of artlessness with his 'readymades', imagination has been trying its hand at auratizing the trivial. This occurs in the wake of Hegel, who had already posed the spirit with the choice between revering a mere thing (the host, a piece of wood, a bad picture) or an intellectually stimulating painting.¹⁷ Edward Kienholz and Paul Thek, to name but two, have in recent decades worked at blending these levels, and it is also the context informing Gelatin's entire oeuvre: heterogeneous materials are mixed, either sublimated or parodistically alienated. In the process, Gelatin constantly touch on the big traditions of popular culture, the customs of carnival and the inverted world, the fools' and asses' festivals (Jean Paul),¹⁸ the parodies of secular and sacred rituals, where actors' roles were often ambivalent, so that a single individual was invested with several meanings.¹⁹

*

A bed is big enough for everyone.

This promise holds true for the quest on which Gelatin and their followers have embarked. They hope to square the circle with a site where they can abandon themselves to blithe despair and where, at the same time, each can try out his solitude. Bosch's *Ship of Fools* provides a fitting illustration: a collective, in the clutches of their desires, and, separated from them, the delicate figure of a fool spooning his feed, a picture that invokes 'jarring harmony' (Horace)²⁰ confronting the solitary fool with the promiscuity of the crowd. It was Brecht who penned the parable for this sensibility of the modern age in his *Ballad of the Adventurers*:

Loafing through hells and flogged through paradises
Calm and grinning, with a vanishing face
At times he dreams of a small meadow
With blue sky overhead and nothing else.

Notes

¹ All factual information is taken from the Gelatin artist collective's documentation published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König: *Gelatin's ACB* (Cologne, 2008).

² See Werner Hofmann, 'Die Kunst der Kunstlosigkeit', in id., *Grundlagen der modernen Kunst* (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 343 ff.

³ Letter from Otto Muehl, 14 January 1962, reprinted in *Von der Aktionsmalerei zum Aktionismus: Wien 1960–1965*, exh. cat., Museum Fridericianum et al. (Kassel, etc., 1988), p. 196.

⁴ Oswald Oberhuber, 'Das unbegrenzt Mögliche im Plastischen', *Bau* 3 (1966), quoted from Robert Fleck, *Avantgarde in Wien*, vol. 1: *Die Chronik* (Vienna, 1982), p. 354.

⁵ Arnulf Rainer, 'Malerei, um die Malerei zu verlassen', in id., *Schriften: Selbstzeugnisse und ausgewählte Interviews* (Ostfildern, 2010) (appeared for the exhibition *Arnulf Rainer: Der Übermaler*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), p. 14.

⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Menschliches, Allzumenschliches', in id., *Ecce homo*.

⁷ See Ernst Gombrich, 'Zum Werke Giulio Romanos', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* new series 8 (1934) (part 1) and new series 9 (1935) (part 2); and Susanne H. Kolter, *Die gestörte Form: Zur Tradition und Bedeutung eines architektonischen Topos* (Weimar, 2002). Gombrich revised his earlier standpoint in the exh. cat. *Zauber der Medusa* (Vienna, 1987), p. 22.

⁸ Quoted in the Gelatin documentation, see n. 1.

⁹ See E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Artushof* (1819), *Des Vetters Eckfenster* (1822); Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (1831); Ludwig Tieck, *Des Lebens Überfluss* (1837).

¹⁰ See Wilhelm Fraenger, *Hieronymus Bosch* (Dresden, 1975); English edition, trans. Helen Sebba (Germany, 1999).

¹¹ 'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.' Quoted from George Boas, *The Heaven of Invention* (Baltimore, 1962), p. 236.

¹² See Werner Hofmann, *Die gespaltene Moderne* (Munich, 2004), especially the last chapter 'Neue Ungewissheiten', pp. 181 ff.

¹³ See Friedrich Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795).

¹⁴ *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, trans. David Cairns (London/New York, 1969), pp. 148 f.

¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. Friedrich Bassenge (Berlin, 1955), p. 139; English edition: *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), p. 103.

¹⁶ See Peter Burke, *Helden, Schurken und Narren: Europäische Volkskultur in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 1981), p. 256; English original: *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978).

¹⁷ In the words of a spokesman for the conservative camp, Friedrich Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr: 'Every relic of a universally revered saint, set up on the altar, can stir pathological emotion far more strongly than the most beautiful work of art, and the poorest caricatures have a far less contentious claim to this distinction than the finest painting.' Quoted from Sigrid Hinz, *C. D. Friedrich in Briefen und Bekenntnissen* (Munich, 1974), p. 149. Ramdohr was polemicizing against the *Tetschen Altar*.

¹⁸ Jean Paul, 'VI. Programm': 'Precisely in the most devout times the fools' and asses' festivals, the mystery plays and mock sermons took place on the first day of Easter, simply because then what was most venerable asserted its farthest distance from these travesties', in id., *Werke*, vol. 5: *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, ed. Norbert Miller (Munich, 1963), p. 117.

¹⁹ Burke 1981, see n. 16, p. 203.

²⁰ 'Concordia discors' (Horace, *Epistles* 1.12.19) refers to the working together of opposed forces in nature.